

18. Celebrity Cook

It may come as a surprise to you that Colmes always wore a double breasted suit, mostly dark navy, lightly striped, a white handkerchief in his top left pocket, though no suspenders underneath, at least I don't think so, as it was rare that he allowed the jacket to be unbuttoned. I have been describing him as Victorian in his ways, but I suppose his dress is more early 20th century. Yet lately he rarely wore a tie, the top button of his pale blue long sleeved shirt undone revealing the thick hair of his chest. It goes without saying that there was no computer on his desk, indeed, only an old fashioned blotter on which he wrote the occasional note with his old fountain pen. Apart from a telephone which he grudgingly used, there was only one other object on his desk, which was an ashtray. When I look back on my cases that I have described so far, I am amazed that I omitted this small but significant fact. He was a chain-smoker, Phillip Morris cigarettes and the occasional cigar in our early days, until the campaign to extinguish smoking finally made it illegal on campus. Fortunately, I was never a smoker. I found it disgusting and almost declined Colmes's offer to me of an assistantship because of it. In fact, I made it a condition when he hired me, that he give up smoking. He hung on though, until the campus finally issued a directive that there be no smoking on campus. It has been some years now that he quit, but he still keeps the ornate ashtray on his desk as a reminder of the good old days. And the smell of tobacco still remains embedded in the furniture and walls of his office.

I recount all of this now because the case I am about to describe demanded the skills and know-how of someone from the 21st century, not the late 19th century that Colmes emulated. So one would think that this case was beyond his skill set. Even so, my faith in Colmes was such that it was I who brought this particular case to him. I did it after much hesitation, not so much because of his technology phobia, but because I thought that his personal health was deteriorating. There were just a few small signs, one that he was going to the gym less often, the other that he seemed a little out of breath when he got up from his desk. I

wanted to ask him if he had been to a doctor, but dared not, for fear he would take it as an insult. He was a Victorian, proud of his physical fitness and his tall straight body of an aging man.

You may remember in an earlier case in which I described the seminar that I attended of the world's top sociologist, Godfrey Gardner. And at the beginning of the seminar, I mentioned that one of the students abruptly got up and left the seminar because of Gardner's first outrageous comment. That student a year or so later appeared at my door. This was most unusual because hardly ever did anyone take the time to come to my office. No one knew where my office was for one thing, and to find it was another, given that it was tucked away next to Colmes's, deep in the tunnels beneath the university. My door was always open, indicating I suppose that I was hoping someone would come in and save me from having to stare at my current draft of my dissertation proposal.

"Do come in," I called. "Richard, isn't it?"

"Right. Just call me Dick. Dick Smith," he answered.

I was a little embarrassed because I never had a visitor to my office before, so I did not have a second chair to offer him. All I had was a small stool that I sometimes used to stand on to reach up to a high shelf of my bookcase. "Hope you don't mind," I said, "but please take a seat." I indicated the stool. He smiled a little, though it did not hide his serious wrinkled face, rough brown beard unevenly clipped, a rich crop of wavy hair, a young man who looked quite old for his age. He was dressed in ill-fitting clothes, most likely bought at the Salvation Army store, gray pants, dark woolen sweater knitted in a rough style that reminded me of Rose the elder.

"I need to talk with Professor Colmes. I understand you're his research assistant?" he asked.

A short fellow, but clearly stocky, he gave the impression that he was always ready for a fight.

"I am. And what is the problem you wish to discuss?" I asked in an unwarranted almost unfriendly way. For whatever reason I felt uncomfortable with his presence and he sensed it.

"Don't worry," he said, smiling, "I won't hurt you. Just because I did time, doesn't mean that I'm some kind of creature that walked out of a horror movie."

It was then that I realized who he was. The School of Criminal Justice had a program in which it admitted a small number of ex-cons, usually one a year, into its program gratis.

“Of course not,” I mumbled most embarrassed. “So what’s the problem? Oh, and now I remember you. You walked out of that dreadful seminar with Gardner.”

“Right, and that’s what I want to talk about,” said Smith.

“That was a year ago. I don’t see what you’re getting at,” I replied .

“I think Gardner is a fraud, but I can’t prove it,” said Smith with a deep frown, “and I hear that this is what Colmes is good at.”

“I don’t know who you have been talking to, but yes, you are right. It does sound like something he might be interested in, and absolutely yes, it would be great to see that asshole get his comeuppance.”

I knocked on my wall to see if Colmes was in, and immediately received the response “Hobson!”

“Looks like he’s in. Let’s go see him,” I grinned.

To my surprise, Colmes got up from his chair and met us as we came in, putting out his hand to Smith. “Dick Smith, I presume,” smiled Colmes with a devilish grin meant for me.

“Professor Colmes, at last I have met you. I have heard a lot...” said Smith. I was beginning to feel left out. It was as if they already knew each other.

“Colmes, this is Dick Smith, he’s in the Criminal Justice School’s ex-con program,” I announced feeling as though I had been upstaged.

“Yes indeed,” answered Colmes as he returned to his chair and I showed Smith to my wicker chair. “I have been expecting you.”

I sat on the overstuffed chair in the corner, as usual, and as I did so, I called out, “how could you know that? He only just now came to me in my office.” Smith was also surprised, but I could see he was trying to hide it.

“My contacts inside,” said Colmes with a hint of mystery, “no doubt they sent you to me?” asked Colmes.

“Well, yes, though Professor Colmes, I like to keep it quiet that I still communicate with insiders. You know. Once a con always a con. It’s hard to get over the prejudice,” answered

Smith.

“Indeed, indeed,” said Colmes.

“And it’s about the prejudice against ex-cons that this is about... Kind of,” said Smith.

“Do tell,” said Colmes.

“He wants to take down Gardner!” I burst out.

“Now, now, Hobson, let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Smith, tell us the whole story and why you need our help.” Colmes was so thoughtful to include me as part of the help. I felt foolish for having jumped in as I did.

“This guy Gardner, I think he is a fraud, but I can’t prove it,” said Smith.

“Pardon,” said Colmes with a small cough clearing his throat, “but that does not sound very scientific. One should not begin with a conclusion, you know.”

“OK. Then let’s call it an hypothesis,” grinned Smith.

“Indeed! Indeed!” affirmed Colmes with a big grin.

Smith continued. “Gardner published a paper in the American Journal of Sociology...”

“One of the top ten,” I put in.

“...claiming that a sample of youths of university student age, 18-24, convicted of a crime and sent to prison had an average IQ of 85 compared to a similar sample of university students whose average IQ was 105. The findings, he claimed were well beyond the point .05 percent level of probability. In other words that cons, like myself, are dumb shits.”

Colmes remained expressionless. “And how do you intend to prove otherwise?”

“Well, I contacted Gardner and asked for his data set so I could replicate his study.”

“What do you mean by replicate. I mean, if you use his same sample, how can you expect to find different results? The errors, or error, may simply be one of sampling,” pressed Colmes.

“Right. But any statistician worth his salt, can reanalyze data and come up with different results,” countered Smith.

“That is a cynical view, if I may say so,” observed Colmes.

“Fair enough,” said Smith. “In any case, he refused to release his data. Claimed some kind of privacy rights of the subjects of the study.”

“And how do you plan to get around that?” asked Colmes.

Smith appeared to ignore the question. “Anyway, I decided to get my own matched samples and replicate his study, which made my dissertation.”

“And?” queried Colmes.

“I found no significant difference in IQ between the two matched groups,” answered Smith with much satisfaction.

“Then you have solved the problem, have you not? Simply publish your findings and this will be sufficient to counter Gardner’s cooked-up study,” said Colmes with a challenging smile.

“Easier said than done. I submitted the paper to several of the top journals and it was roundly rejected by all. Some of the nastiest critiques came from Gardner, even though all the top journals are supposed to be blind peer reviews. You can always pick who wrote them, especially Gardner.”

“Are you sure it was Gardner?” asked Colmes.

“Sure sounds like him,” I interjected.

“Then, maybe your study is flawed,” said Colmes staring hard at Smith.

“Maybe. But if it is, so is Gardner’s,” said Smith with a sigh. “I mean, I applied his own methodology exactly, and wrote up the paper for each journal, just like his. And of course I cited him profusely.”

“Hmm,” opined Colmes, “this is indeed an interesting problem. Let us meet this time again tomorrow while I think about it.”

Smith appeared disappointed. He sat as though he did not want to leave.

“Come,” I said, “we can talk more in my office. Be assured that Colmes will think about it and will as usual come up with a solution. You can bet on it.”

I stood by Smith as he reluctantly rose, thanked Colmes, and we turned to leave. And just as we reached the exit, Colmes called out, “what is Gardner’s university?”

“Chicago, of course,” called Smith, dejected and angry.

“Oh, and would you be so good as to leave a copy of your rejected papers with my excellent research assistant Hobson, here before you depart?”

Now, while it is probably unnecessary for me to recount this

gossip, and I warn you that is all it is, but the student rumor—and come to think of it not just confined to students—has it that Gardner in his youth, before he entered university set fire to a house in the Chicago's West side, West Garfield Park. It occurred during the 1980s when school desegregation was at its height and school bussing was introduced causing considerable racial conflict. Two persons, so it was claimed, though the bodies were never found, were killed in the house fire. Gardner, however, always denied this accusation, though he admits that he was in the area when it happened. That was a reasonable explanation because in fact he grew up in that area and was one of the minority of white students who attended the local high school. And in his defense, there was a report deep in the pages of the *Chicago Times*, of his arrest, his brief interrogation at the police precinct, then release. The article in the *Chicago Times* did not shrink from pointing out that, had Gardner been black, he would have been locked up, charged with the crime, then interrogated until he confessed. Not to mention that house fires in that area then, as of now, were common, not surprising given their poor condition, in fact every tenement was a fire risk.

I tell you this as a kind of anticipatory defense of Gardner. Maybe his early impoverished background had something to do with his obsession with clawing his way to the top. Of course, Smith also knew all this, and he joyfully recounted the rumor to as many others as would listen. He even embellished it when passing on the rumor to me, claiming that Gardner was also involved in the killing of great basketball star Ben Wilson.

I find it amazing that the mixing of fact with fiction enjoys a rich life among people who would otherwise describe themselves as “social scientists” as would all those who inhabit this university (except the philosophers and creatures of the English department). Yet it is in universities that movements and protests so often occur when facts do not quite match the fictions that live in the heads of young (and even older) students. Protests and demonstrations, especially those that are violent, serve to embellish the factual claims of the protesters. But here, I begin to sermonize. Though I am doing a philosophy Ph.D. So I suppose that puts me in the faith or faithless (no difference there) categories.

What does this diversion have to do with the case? A great

deal. It offers an explanation both for the extreme antics of Gardner who indeed has clearly demonstrated in his seminars that he will do anything to claw his way to the top and stay there, but even more extreme, once on top to keep all others down. If you have the power, use it. A bit like Caligula, though he used it for fun, not domination, which produced far more dreadful results. Although, I must admit that in Gardner's seminar, I felt as though we were being played with. Could Gardner be deposed as was Caligula?

I knew that Colmes was up to something when he casually dismissed Smith and me, promising to "think about it." Of course, he had already thought about it and was up to something for sure. After Smith departed my office I picked up Smith's paper and read it through quickly. It looked perfectly reasonable to me, as far as these boring empirical studies went. Then came the familiar knock on my wall beckoning me to Colmes.

"Now, Hobson, I have an important errand for you," he said with a mild smile, well not a real smile, just a flicker of the corner of his mouth.

"So I am your errand boy," I quipped, feeling a little belligerent after the Smith interview.

Colmes ignored my unnecessary remark. "I need you to visit the Cocksackie prison."

He paused awaiting my response.

"And?" I asked.

"Meet with an inmate by the name of Tiro Sellin. He will have something for you, or should I say, you will need to write down what he tells you. We can't risk passing something from inmate to visitor. They might get suspicious."

"And what will it be, then? I mean, why can't he phone you? Inmates get phone privileges these days, don't they?"

"Indeed. But it is too risky. He will give you a password. How he will do that I am not sure. It will be a coded message of some kind."

"And the password is for?" I asked.

Colmes ignored the question. Instead he said with a wry smirk, "and by the way he is blind."

I looked at him in disbelief. "How? I mean why?" I stammered.

Colmes grinned. He truly loved doing this to me. "I thought

you would never ask,” he said. “Tiro is an old friend of mine from Philadelphia where I played cricket for a few years while I was a student or not really a student, trying to decide what to do with my life.”

I sat on my wicker chair and leaned forward elbows on his desk, completely overcome. This was Colmes, the person known rarely to talk about himself, about whom practically nothing was known about his past. I was quite taken aback. Though now in retrospect I think that it was at a stage when his health was deteriorating for reasons then unknown to me. Colmes continued.

“He was always a bit on the shady side, and I found that, well, fascinating, exciting maybe. He would frequently show up to our meetings at the local cricket club, had lots of money, pay for our drinks, even meals and think nothing of it. Then he would disappear for a few weeks and show up again and splurge his money on good food for all of us.”

“And all this when he was blind?”

“Indeed,” said Colmes.

“Tell me more, I urged. Where did he get his money?”

“That I do not know. But I do know *how* he got his money” answered Colmes.

“There’s a difference?” I asked, perplexed.

“Indeed. You see he was, and still is, a cyber sleuth of the first order.” Colmes looked at me amused.

“You mean a computer genius?” I asked getting tired of my own questions.

“Of the first order. He can track down anything on the internet or even on the inside of a desktop computer,” said Colmes pleased with his own apparent acquaintance with this rapidly growing field of information technology.

Yes. I know. Colmes, who had to be cajoled and nagged to install a telephone on his desk. Let alone a computer. I was amazed. And still am. “Don’t tell me,” I said almost breathless, “he has hacked into Gardner’s computer account at University of Chicago and...”

Colmes cut me off and finished my sentence “...did not download the database in question because he did not know what one. There were several files some quite large and it would have taken too long to download them.”

“Then poor Smithy,” I said with warranted familiarity, “will

have to commit a crime by hacking into Gardner's account and downloading the file in question."

"Indeed, Hobson. Indeed."

"And Tiro did all this while inside the prison?" I asked with admiration.

"Indeed again. You know they have an excellent rehabilitation program in prison and one part of that is teaching them about computers. Funded by IBM as an outreach program. Quite an irony, don't you think Hobson?"

"Indeed, I do," I replied, dumbfounded.

"Then off you go, Hobson and do your part. Get the password, and the username, the latter is already available in Gardner's email address. "

"You know about email?" I said mockingly.

"I know far more than that," he answered staring at me in a way that hinted lightly of a threat. "Now, off you go. And be careful of your terminology when you speak to Tiro and later to Smith. And especially with Smith, do not use any word that hints of breaking in, or of a crime, or whatever. Understand?"

I nodded assent and stood up to leave.

Colmes continued. "And when you have the information needed, contact Smith and bring him here to work out the next steps. This will need to be done very carefully."

I nodded assent again. And I was on my way to Coxsackie.

About thirty miles south of the university, the freeway gradually rises, cut into the side of a slope that marks the beginning of the Catskills, a low mountain range, most of which, on the eastern side, has been cleared of forest. Coxsackie prison lies at a distance and its view from the freeway is as though on an architect's map, square squat buildings, roadways and fences connecting them and protecting them from visitors and inmates alike. Every time I visit, I shudder at the sense of isolation, as I drive off the freeway, the prison sitting alone, surrounded by rich green meadows in spring and summer, or desolate stretches of the dark frozen fields of winter. I know this place and hate coming here. On and off over the past dozen years or so, I have ventured in to do my charitable part to teach an occasional class to those inmates who were studying for a bachelors degree of something like it. It took a long time until I could feel comfortable standing

before a small class of inmates, some of whom may have committed atrocious crimes. The crimes they may have committed of course, were in my imagination. And some of them knew it, approaching me with a quiet glee when they sensed my fear.

On this day, however, my mission was quite different. I did not find the security procedures demeaning, or threatening, even though the rough hands of the guards sometimes hurt when they checked my pockets. I was ushered into the visiting room and took up my seat at the long counter where I awaited the arrival of the mysterious Tiro Sellin. I looked around and saw several others either waiting or talking with inmates across the counter. The noise of chatter echoed in the sparsely furnished room, everything shiny and excessively polished, the din of metal chairs banging and sliding on the bare wooden floor also highly polished.

I heard the clanking of security doors opening and closing, and soon enough, my client, or whatever he was, appeared at the door and waddled towards me, reminding me of a penguin. He knew who I was, I do not know how, and I don't know why he looked around the room because he was supposed to be blind. However he did feel around a little for the chair that was opposite me and sat down, making himself comfortable.

“You're Tiro Sellin?” I asked, rising to shake hands.

“So how's my old mate Colmes?” he asked as he stretched out his hand and we shook. He held on to my hand tightly, turned his head in the direction he thought was my face and I felt a small slip of paper rub against the palm of my hand.

“He's fine, Mister Sellin” I said, though this was a small fib, because in my personal opinion Colmes was not in that good of health at all.

“Please, call me Tiro. We had some great adventures together,” he said with a gleeful laugh. “You wouldn't believe. I remember the time we went to the Casino, that was...”

As much as I would have liked to hear those stories, and perhaps one day I would return to hear them, I was here on business and wanted to get it done as quickly as possible. I had a dissertation to write, after all. Besides I hated being locked up in a prison. A contradiction, I know. After all my office was not all that different from living in a prison, the President of the

University Finneas O'Brien had even famously said so. But I was there of my own accord. That was the huge difference.

"So our business has concluded?" I broke in.

"Don't you want to know how I came to be blind?" he asked.

"Not really," I bristled.

"I see, *sagor nahor*," he said, "that Colmes's Victorian manners have not rubbed off on you."

I sat back and took stock of myself. I was being a bastard. Why not be friendly? Never know, his services may be wanted again. "I'm sorry," I said apologetically, "it's this place. You know. I mean, of course you know."

"We were breaking into a safe," whispered Tiro with a grin as though he were taking me into his confidence. I remained silent but leaned over as if I were expecting him to whisper in my ear. "Colmes had an oxy torch cutting a hole in the safe door. Don't know if you've seen this, but the cutting throws off huge sparks. Colmes, of course, was wearing dark protective glasses. I was kneeling right next to him. Just as the big hole was done, the torch gave off a huge spark and it hit me in the eyes."

Tiro stopped, expecting my response.

Naturally, I was speechless. "You, you mean you and Colmes, you were, he was, I mean..." I stuttered.

"And that's what blinded me," continued Tiro, acting as though he had merely told me the weather forecast.

I leaned heavily back in my chair and the legs squeaked on the polished floor. Tiro grinned. I took a deep breath, and looked at him now, more closely. I realized then that there is so much that is lost about a person when they are dressed in bland prison garb like all other inmates. Still, I could imagine him all dressed in civvies. It would not be unlike Colmes—sorry for the double negative—a kind of dapper Victorian outfit, nicely ironed gray lightly striped pants, tweed jacket perhaps, cream shirt with broad tie knotted loosely. A monocle perhaps. I smiled inwardly at this fit of silliness. Being in a prison did things to me. But the face would be the same. A tiny face and head, grizzled features behind a gray beard, trimmed to a medium length. And, though he was sitting, I had noticed as he walked in that he was very short, and bandy. So short that my mind, now almost out of control, shot a vision into my eyes of Colmes and Tiro as a Laurel and Hardy couple. Then it occurred to me that Tiro's build was rather like

my own. Short, wiry and nimble. I was unable to hold back a grin.

“You think that’s funny?” asked Tiro.

And now I had to wonder, how did he know that I grinned? He’s blind, isn’t he? Or maybe not? Though I have heard that blind people develop a sixth sense or whatever. Probably a popular lie. I nervously found myself rubbing the palms of my hands with my fingers and then remembered the piece of paper that Tiro had passed to me.

“Flower,” said Tiro in a loud voice. I looked at him with some consternation. “It is the key to any gardener, is that not right?” he added.

I looked at the piece of paper on which was written SAGINAHOR, letters scrawled roughly as though written with one’s eyes closed.

“That’s what you said before,” I muttered.

“Said what?” Tiro asked.

“Sagi Nahor!” I said loudly, and everyone looked around.

“Shhhh!” whispered Tiro. “It means ‘perfect light’ and other things as well.”

“So?” I asked getting back to my impatient self.

“Colmes says he has a friend in your university computing center,” whispered Tiro. “If FLOWER doesn’t work, tell him to use SAGINAHOR.”

“All right,” I mumbled. I didn’t really get it.

“You will need FLOWER to enter. You can get his username from the University of Chicago’s web site, believe it or not. That professor, he is a wolf of a man, that is for sure,” said Tiro with his big bearded grin.

I repeated everything over and over. I had no writing implements or paper upon which to write because they took everything at security. And there was a good chance they would search me on my way out.

“Got it?” asked Tiro showing some concern.

“FLOWER? It’s kind of obvious, isn’t it? You sure it will work?” I asked.

“No I’m not. Since I entered his account, it’s slightly possible that the university’s security system, which is basically non-existent, picked it up and he may have changed his password.”

“And that’s it, then?” I said in consternation. I was about to

get up and leave, sure that this guy was slightly mad and useless to us.

“No. It’s not. As Colmes will tell you, you always need a backup plan. Right?” said Tiro, seeming to lean over my shoulder.

“And that is?” I asked impatiently.

“Sagi Nahor,” grinned Tiro.

“I don’t see it,” I squinted to press home my frustration with this silly man.

“That’s the password to professor Alfred Smith, a professor in the University of Chicago’s department of philosophy. I looked up the listing of faculty that is also on line, and gave him a computer account. Then I copied Flower’s databases into that account. There are quite a lot of them.”

You can imagine. I was dumbfounded. I gulped more than once in amazement as I tried to find the words to respond. “Tiro, I don’t know what to say! I’m speechless.”

“Think nothing of it,” he said. “Colmes and me, we go way back.”

“Thank you, Tiro. Got to run!” I cried, eager to get out and write everything down so I wouldn’t forget. “Thank you for your immense help, and the very best from Colmes.”

I quickly departed without another word, leaving Tiro staring blankly, a grin so large one could see it through his beard.

Upon my return to Albany I dropped off the rental car and made straight to Colmes’s office. For the moment, I avoided contacting Smithy. I was not sure which way Colmes would go. Maneuver Smithy into illegally penetrating the University of Chicago computer system and thence hacking into Gardner’s files, or find someone here who might take that risk? Certainly, if Smithy was caught, being an ex-con it would be good-bye for several years, especially as the woke generation that was rapidly overtaking universities were now classifying computer hacking as an act of violence and arguing that it should be punished as severely as physical violence.

I was surprised to find Colmes lying flat on the floor of his office, right where my wicker chair usually stood.

“Come, Hobson, take my chair at the desk. I will not be a moment. He was raising one leg, kept straight, a few inches or so,

dropping it slowly, then the other. Yet he lay there, his late Victorian double breasted jacket still buttoned up, his suit pants folded in at the ankles with bicycle clips.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Getting a bit weak at the knees, Hobson. A sign of aging, is it not?”

“But you used to go to the gym every day. Have you quit that too?” I asked as though I were his health advisor.

“I only go to the gym to maintain my contacts with important people, that is people who I consider important to my work. I don’t exercise seriously there. Just casual” he answered, a little out of breath, his usually pale gray face now flushed at the cheeks.

“Have you been to a medical doctor?” I asked, choosing my words carefully. “I mean, are you Okay?”

“Medical Doctor? You mean Quack?” he answered looking to be challenged. “I already know what they will say. ‘Reduce alcohol, reduce sugar, reduce salt, no saturated fat, eat tasteless vegetables, eat a balanced diet, drink tasteless water until it comes out of every orifice.’ What kind of a life is that?”

By the time Colmes had finished that long sentence he was almost out of breath and he let his leg drop with a small bang. “Satisfied?” he snapped. “Where is Smith by the way? I asked you to bring him with you.”

I stood looking down at this amusing piece of Victoriana having, for him, a temper tantrum.

“Colmes,” I ordered sternly, “that’s enough! Stop that silliness and get back to your desk! You look ridiculous down there.” I wanted to put my hand over my mouth indicating that I was sorry I said what I said and in the manner I said it. I was standing above his head as he looked up, his eyes strained to look back over his skull.

Then to my surprise, he raised his hand and said, “help me up, Hobson.” I took this to mean that he had forgiven me my insolence. Though I hoped also that he would take my advice and get himself checked out properly. I grabbed his hand and pulled him up.

“So Tiro came through?” asked Colmes as he unruffled his suit, removed the bicycle clips from his pants and sat down at his desk.

“Well, that and more. He gave me two passwords, I think.”

“What does that mean, Hobson? Either he gave you passwords or he didn’t”

“One is for Gardner’s account. The other is for a professor Alfred Smith some random professor at University of Chicago. Tiro opened an account in his name.”

“And why did he do that?” asked Colmes as he opened to his *Times* crossword.

“Just in case the Chicago University security system noticed his use of Gardner’s account and changed the password.”

I found myself getting annoyed again. Colmes asking all these questions as though he didn’t trust me to have thoroughly carried out his instructions.

“Tiro also advised getting a computer whiz to do the job. He said that you would no doubt know someone.”

“Indeed, I do,” said Colmes with that satisfied tiny smirk.

“Let me guess. Cecilia,” I said, with a touch of micro aggression.

“Excellent Hobs! Excellent! In a way,” he said pensively, “she does a lot of what I do. She solves psychological problems of her student clients, and to do that she needs access to all kinds of information, some of it often shielded by obtrusive and excessive privacy laws. It was I who urged her, against her own counselor’s advice, to do a combined major in computer science and counseling.”

“You would put her at harm’s way? I mean, it’s Dick Smith’s beef. Let him take the risk.”

Colmes frowned, but I could see that he too was a little worried. I continued to press the point. “After all, what do we care if Gardner is an asshole? There are hundreds or even thousands like him all over academia. Why should we stick our necks out for a chagrined graduate student like Smith, who had his paper rejected by a top journal?”

“I see your point,” agreed Colmes. “Too bad we do not know whether Smith’s accusations will be corroborated.”

“And now we have come full circle,” I sighed.

“Once again, Hobson, you are perfectly on point,” praised Colmes, indeed most unusual.

We both fell silent.

Then it came to me. It was in fact so obvious I could have

kicked myself for having been so preoccupied with being annoyed at Colmes for treating me like some fresh undergraduate, made worse by my impatience with Tiro.

“Tiro has done it for us,” I said self-consciously.

“How? Why would he do that?” asked Colmes whom I was sure already knew the answer.

That second password, *sagi nahor...*”

Colmes interrupted. “Yes, perfect light, but a common saying referring to the blind, an opposite of sorts. What about it?”

“That was the password hint he gave for the second account he opened in that professor Smith’s name,” I continued.

“You already told me that,” said Colmes looking amused.

“Well, he said that he had copied all Gardner’s databases into that account, that is actually Tiro’s account. So all Cecilia has to do is download the data from that account and not bother trying to enter Gardner’s account at all. So there’s very little risk until they discover Tiro’s fake account. Which, according to Tiro is very unlikely.”

“In that case, Hobson, I think we can leave Cecilia out of it, and go straight to Smith. Let him carry the burden of his resentment and urge for retribution,” mused Colmes.

Why not share the risk?,” I mused aloud. “Perhaps Cecilia could be on reserve in case—I am choosing my words carefully here—Smith is unable to log into Gardner’s account and download his databases.”

Colmes sat back in his chair his hands wide open, fingers spread apart as usual, tapping them together. Then he leaned forward and said with a determined satisfaction, “let’s do it, Hobson. Arrange for Cecilia and Smith to meet us here tomorrow morning, or any time that suits them.”

Had he forgotten the other point I had made? Why pick on Gardner, one of possibly thousands? Even if he is shown to have cooked the books of his database, why pick him out of thousands? Is it just his bad luck that we got him? The same as getting caught speeding? I felt a bit like the cop who hides away in a laneway with a speed camera, then zips out to catch a speeder, one of many. There was no way to ignore the fact that we were, in fact, enabling an individual who was motivated, if not by revenge, by the same motivation of Gardner: by his destruction, it was one fewer with whom Smith must compete. I must say, there is a nice

symmetry to that.

You can imagine how pleased I was. I had won a kind of battle, not really a battle, let's say a challenge of my Mentor, and he not only had recognized it, but was in fact very pleased with my performance. Of course, my successes were also his, whereas his successes were not mine, if you see what I mean. It's a matter of hierarchy as I have repeated so often throughout my cases.

I arranged for the meeting and purposely made it so that they did not meet with me prior to entering Colmes's office. We would all show up there at the appointed time, which happened to be the afternoon at 4.00 pm., about the time for afternoon tea.

So pleased was I with Colmes's recognition of my talents, I showed up in his office a little early. He did not even look up from his *Times* crossword puzzle, though I think I heard him mumble "afternoon Hobson." I walked past him through door number two to the kitchen and retrieved a chair and noisily placed it beside my wicker one. I decamped to my usual place when there were guests, in the corner on the overstuffed chair.

Then Colmes mumbled. "We'll need another chair. I asked Dunstan to join us. Just in case Smith doesn't know what to look for."

We were back to the usual. It annoyed me. Why couldn't he treat me more like an equal, I mean respect me as a colleague? Even a friend? And surely we were friends? I noisily trotted down to the kitchen and retrieved a chair, making sure to bang the legs against the wall and doorway. Colmes ignored me. I might have said something that I would later regret, when I heard the clinking of cups and saucers in the kitchen, the sure sign that Rose was preparing afternoon tea, scones with jam and cream of course.

Colmes looked up. "You better tell Rose that there will be three guests this afternoon," then went back to his crossword puzzle.

I did what I was told, then briefly slipped back to my office to retrieve my little stepping stool to use as a coffee table beside the overstuffed chair. All three guests arrived just as I was at Colmes's door. "Welcome all," I said with a forced smile, "go right in and take your places at Professor Colmes's desk." They did as requested and I sat quietly in the overstuffed chair, waiting expectantly for Colmes to acknowledge their presence, and more

importantly for Rose to appear with the afternoon tea. At last, Colmes looked up from his crossword, folded the paper, and placed it carefully in his desk drawer.

“Well, now,” he said, “Hobson and I have thought carefully about this venture, indeed a risky one and concluded that the safest way to move forward is for Mr. Smith here to take the first step which is to open Gardner’s account using the password that we have obtained, and his username which I understand is publicly available.”

Smithy interrupted. “That’s no problem if you have the password. I’ve emailed him many times, as you might guess. He has at least two different emails, so I will try each one and hope it works. So what’s the password?”

Smithy was clearly excited and champing at the bit.

To my surprise Colmes produced a small blackboard from the drawer of his desk and a piece of chalk, beckoning to me to take them.

“...write the first one down, Hobson.”

I wrote in big letters FLOWER turned the blackboard around and showed it to our guests.

Cecilia raised a finger and said, “excuse me, but really, FLOWER as a password? Gardner must be pretty dumb to use a common word like that, especially with a name like Gardner.”

Smith stirred in my wicker chair, and Dunstan looked on amused.

“Well, the password isn’t exactly FLOWER,” I called from my corner. You have to play with the letters.

Then Cecilia’s cheery face lit up. “Oh, I see, this Gardner, he’s a big shot, tramples on all who get in his way, right? A wolf and proud of it!”

“Exactly!” Chimed Smithy. And Dunstan even stirred a little indicating his agreement. No doubt he’d had dealings with Gardner, given his notoriety, and being an expert statistician and all. In fact, he was naturally suspicious of many at the top who were just a little too successful with their publications. Many of their papers were very ordinary, wreaking of data manipulation.

“What are you getting at, Cecilia?” asked Colmes who I am sure had already guessed what it was.

Cecilia responded quickly. “I’m thinking that he has made up his password with a word associated with his name, a

gardener, what does he do? He grows flowers. Then he does what lots of people do when they are sick of using passwords they cannot remember, they simply write the favorite word backwards. And in this case FLOWER becomes REWOLF. Get it?"

"It's exactly the sort of game my inside source of these passwords would play," said Colmes, "I think you are probably right. And given my informant's own circumstances he would certainly not want to pass the actual password to Hobson here who met with him. But he also gave us a second password plus username, in case the first one failed. It is SAGINAHOR."

"Oh," chirped the now excited Smithy, "your informant is blind?"

"Well, in a way yes, he is," answered Colmes evasively, "why do you ask?"

"Because it's a popular Hebrew expression that literally means perfect light, but refers to its opposite, that is blindness where there is no light," answered Smithy, glowing with pride.

Colmes nodded to me, a signal to write SAGINAHOR down beneath FLOWER on the blackboard.

"And the username?" asked Smithy.

I decided that it was time that I had my say. "You're not going to believe this, but it is the real name of a Chicago Professor of Philosophy. He apparently does not know he has a computer account. Our blind informant has now given him one," I replied with an equal amount of pride..

"So what's that for, then?" asked Smithy.

"In case you fail with the Gardner account," I quickly replied. "Besides..."

I was about to spill the beans that our blind informant had already copied all Gardner's databases into his own account, when Dunstan, who had sat quietly amused all this time, intervened.

"Let's be careful what we are talking about here. Exactly what is it that you want to download and why?" he asked.

"Gardner's been cooking the books," announced Smithy with an air of moral rectitude, "and it's time he was held to account."

"What, exactly does that mean?" asked Dunstan as though he were quizzing a student in a dissertation defense.

"I don't know yet, but I will once we have the evidence,"

said Smithy defensively.

I was beginning to see why Colmes invited Dunstan to attend.

“And what would you consider evidence, in fact, what will having Gardner’s databases tell you?”

“Well, I will use the same statistical analysis he used to test his hypotheses and see if they come out the same.”

Dunstan gave Colmes a worried look, then returned to his cross examination of Smithy.

“I seriously doubt that you will be able to find out whether he has been cooking the books, as you call it. There is already a version of Gardner’s database floating around, isn’t there?”

“That is correct,” I said. We had a small problem relating to that database in a previous case. I glanced quickly over to Colmes, but he remained passive.

“Then maybe you should start with that?” asked Dunstan addressing Smithy, who looked a little crestfallen.

“However,” I added, “our inside source says that there were several databases in Gardner’s file. “Perhaps comparing the databases might reveal something?”

“It’s probably worth a try,” said Dunstan in a more positive light. “What you need to look for are manipulations of the sampling. And you will get that by looking at the number and pattern of missing values in each database. Obviously if you have matched samples, the way to reach a level of significance that you want, is simply to drop certain cases from your sample until your analysis produces significant results.”

OK,” responded Smithy. “I’ll have a look at the two databases that are floating around among the students.”

“Don’t bother,” said Dunstan, “I have consulted for both those dissertations and can tell you that they are identical. You will need more than two. Of course, if he is smart, and we all know he is, I’d be very surprised if he retained all the databases that he tried with his manipulation. Assuming, of course, that he’s been cooking the books as you call it.”

“I have another appointment,” said Cecilia. “I don’t think I am needed here anymore. Good luck and be careful!” she said cheerfully, turning to Smithy. “I don’t want you coming into me all depressed.”

Colmes stood, struggling a little to rise up to his full straight

height. "Thank you for coming my dear. And my regards to your mom."

This left an empty chair between Smithy and Dunstan. Silence reigned as we all, I suppose, were thinking how hard it will be to get the son-of-a-bitch. Then the silence was broken by the clinking of cups and saucers and Rose the younger appeared through doorway number two, with a large tray of cups and saucers and the essential scones with jam and cream. She placed the tray on Colmes's desk. "Help yourselves," she said with a faint smile, and quickly returned to the kitchen.

Dunstan, who had become a frequent visitor to the office, lunged forward and helped himself. Smithy sat back a little embarrassed. I could see that his eyes were almost popping out at the sight of the jam and cream.

I felt a little sorry for Smithy who left our meeting a little crestfallen, though the scones had cheered him up a little. Being an ex-con, he knew that he had to look after himself, and decided to wait a little until making the attempt to acquire Gardner's files. In other words, his vengefulness against Gardner had been softened by Dunstan's words of caution. Instead of rushing in and claiming to all that Gardner was cooking his data, he would wait a while then quietly access the databases, download them and examine them according to Dunstan's advice.

Unfortunately, in the time that lapsed most likely Gardner had been informed that his computer account had been hacked, since the REWOLF password did not work. Smithy quickly switched to the SAGINAHOR password of the unknowing Alfred Smith, which worked. He was suddenly confronted with a screenful of files which he proceeded to download. They were all EXCEL files, which for those unacquainted with the arcane language of Microsoft, were database files that could be opened using Microsoft's software of that name.

We need not go into the details of Smithy's search. It is enough to say that there were some thirty files, all of them a different version of the original. Fortunately, each file was dated so Smithy could roughly link particular files to particular publications of Gardner in the order as they appeared in his favorite top journals. True to Dunstan's advice, the number and location of missing values appeared in different amounts and

places according to the different publications that Gardner had developed. He went back to Dunstan who helped him formulate a letter to the editors of all the ten journals in which Gardner had published, recounting the missing values patterns and questioning the veracity of Gardner's entire work. Dunstan insisted that Smithy return to Colmes and me to further discuss to whom the letter should be sent. And so we met, this time me in my wicker chair, Smithy in a kitchen chair just beside mine. This time, there would be no tea with scones. This was serious business.

Colmes looked over the draft and passed it to me. It looked awfully like a time bomb.

"Are you sure you want to go ahead with this?" asked Colmes talking almost like a father would speak to his son who was about to go to war.

Smithy sat silently, looking straight at Colmes. "I've been through a lot. You know that. Your mate in prison. I know all about him," he said in a quiet and calm voice.

This really took me by surprise. It should not have. Colmes had often said to me that there was an extensive subterranean communication system among cons and ex-cons. Nothing organized. Simply a system that emerged on its own, so to speak, kind of like when you look at droplets on top of a basin of water that seem to float aimlessly around and eventually joining up to make one large bubble then in a flash disappear into the body of water.

"Let's look at this situation carefully," said Colmes in a controlled monotone. "If you send this bombshell to the editors of the various journals, the first thing they will think about is how it will affect them. And of course, they are the final gatekeepers, so the buck, as we say, is on them. My guess is, and I admit it is a cynical one and perhaps reflects my lack of experience in this kind of humiliating exercise of submitting one's thoughts to a panel of so-called peers who mistakenly, or perhaps purposely believe that only justice can be done when a group of superior peers passes judgment upon the work of one who is not in their club."

Good grief! I thought to myself. Is this the detached, scientific and rational mind of Colmes? His assessment seemed to be not so much cynical, as he admitted, but bore a distinct

element of resentment. A chip on his shoulder, some might say. Never, never would I have thought that of the supremely confident Colmes. Surely it was not that which drove him. I now began to worry that perhaps something was wrong with him. In fact, I had noticed his physical health appeared to be deteriorating. His trouble standing up from his swivel chair. A shortness of breath at times. And he coughed perhaps more than usual to clear his throat.

Smithy looked back at Colmes, his jaw dropped, but I saw a twinkle in his eye and could see that this small speech of Colmes had buoyed him considerably. “So you think I should do it?” he asked with an expectant grin.

“No, I do not,” answered Colmes with what for him was quite an amused smile. “Rather, I think you should attack him on a playing field where the odds are a little more evenly distributed.”

Smithy was puzzled, as was I. Then Colmes continued.

“You should address a brief letter to the Editor of the Chronicle of Higher Education, attaching the notes in your draft letter to the editors of the relevant journals. There, your chances are much better that you will be listened to, if not for the actual content of your case, but for the very big scandal that it will create in all of academia. There are many, many researchers in academia and elsewhere who have much to hide, isn’t that so Hobson?”

This request for agreement took me by surprised. I mumbled back, “I should say so,” and looked expectantly at Smithy, who sat there absolutely glowing. I could see his mind churning away.

Then Colmes leaned forward and said, “and by the way, you should sign the letter in your own name of course, but request that your name not be published with the letter, for fear of reprisals. That will create a nice atmosphere of mystery and evil.”

The satisfaction that Colmes displayed in saying this was astounding. And Smithy lapped it up. Though surely he understood that he really was in much danger. An ex-con, accusing a superstar was unlikely to be believed.

Godfrey Gardner was mildly upset when he learned that his university computer account had been hacked. University computer systems are popular targets of hackers, often times by young smart-ass students doing it for the fun of it. In a way he

admired them for having the guts to go for it, and looked upon the incident as a small price to pay for the immense convenience that computing systems provided, making his life much easier to collect data, analyze it in a matter of minutes instead of hours. After all, it simply required that he change his password, and the university computer authorities were always nagging their users to use passwords that had a high level of security.

On this morning, however, when he came into his office, someone had left a copy of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on his desk. On the bottom right of the front page he saw a headline that read, “STAR PROFESSOR COOKED BOOKS, says student.” Gardner picked it up and read carefully the short but inflammatory article:

Albany, Monday 10, 2010. Schumaker graduate student, name withheld at his request for fear of recriminations, has accused distinguished professor, Godfrey Gardner, University of Chicago top rated school of sociology, of having altered his databases, in particular introducing missing values into certain versions of the databases according to the hypotheses he claimed to be testing. Gardner is renowned for his research on the intelligence of prison inmates, purporting to show that the I.Q. of prisoners, regardless of length of time in prison, was ten points or more lower than those of a matched sample of individuals who have never been convicted of a crime or incarcerated. Attempts to contact the professor by the *Chronicle* have so far not managed to find him in his office. We recognize that these are serious accusations and the *Chronicle* is committed to investigating this accusation to the fullest extent. To this end we have engaged the services of a nationally known statistician to look into these databases that are currently in the possession of this student who has refused to reveal how he came into possession of Gardner’s databases.

Stunned, Gardner dropped the paper on his desk and instantly, his phone rang, as it would keep doing the rest of the day. But he automatically picked up the phone.

“Godfrey?” asked the voice, familiar but Gardner was not sure who it was.

“Yes, who is this?”

“Max Dunstan, Godfrey. I’m told you are in a spot of bother.”

There was no love lost between these two men. Because, of course, they were in competition, even though technically speaking Dunstan was in a different field, of mathematics, though he did most of his scholarly work in the field of sociology, Gardner’s sacred domain.

“No bother. I have nothing to defend. I don’t know who this asshole might be, but he’s going to pay for it, I’ll see to that,” answered Gardner. “Anyway, what business is it of yours?”

“Well, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has hired me to investigate whether there is any substance to these accusations. So I thought I’d better start with you.”

“Forget it, Dunstan. It’s all bullshit. Why would I want to fudge my data? I’m at the top of my field. All done by publishing my work in the very best journals. If you say my work is crap, then you are saying the work of my peers who have judged my work, is also crap.”

“Look Godfrey, I don’t want to get into argument with you. All I need to do is to have a look at your databases and if there is nothing wrong as I’m sure will be the case, then all’s good and you have nothing to worry about,” assured Dunstan.

“I’m not worried about anything,” answered Gardner. “My peers have judged my work A1. And that’s that. As for the accusations and the rest. Bring them on. All publicity is good publicity, negative or positive, as I’ve said many times.”

“But Godfrey, I can tell you that your accuser, and there are others, is out for your blood,” warned Dunstan.

“Bring it on. It will make me even more famous, if that is possible,” bragged Gardner.

“Okay, if you say so,” replied Dunstan. “Then would you mind sending me copies of all your databases, that is, those related to the comparison of intelligence between prisoners and non-prisoners?”

“They are not available to the public. In fact they are the property of the University of Chicago, so you will have to get permission from them. Besides, I have not written anything on that topic for some years now so have not looked at the databases. It’s entirely possible that they have been routinely erased from the University’s computer system.”

Gardner hung up the phone, a self-satisfied smirk on his unpleasant, closely shaven face that looked like the stamped image of a coin attached to a pink bald head.

Unbeknownst to Gardner, Dunstan, anticipating this problem, had already contacted the University of Chicago Computing system chief and established that the databases were in fact still in Gardner's account, and received the assurance that they would not be deleted unless requested by Gardner. They did, of course, refuse Dunstan's request for a copy of Gardner's databases.

In any case, the *Chronicle* followed up with a more detailed account of how the databases were manipulated by Gardner, so it seemed as though Gardner's goose was cooked, as they say. And there was worse to come.

It took several weeks for the editorial boards of the top ten sociology journals in America to meet and discuss the Gardner case. This was not because of the organizational challenge since boards of the journals were mostly made up of the same top ten people. And of course Gardner was one of the board of every top ten journal, and president of half of them. The delay in getting all together was caused by the reticence of several members who were busy making sure that their own databases were safely tucked away, out of sight, and certainly beyond the tentacles of any computer system.

Gardner vociferously attacked the *Chronicle* accusing them of doing the same as the burning of books in the middle ages. This had nothing to do with the issue at all, but of course that was of no concern. And the *Chronicle* immediately understood what was at stake and came very close to recanting the story.

Then came the predictable demand, that the accuser step forward and it was this demand that, incredibly, finally led to Gardner's downfall.

Naturally, Smithy had been waiting nervously on the sidelines. There was much that the media would love if they got their hands on it. Dunstan, complicit in the release of the accusation, appointed to evaluate the accusation. An ex-con who was the accuser. A shadowy figure (Colmes) who orchestrated the entire plot, and the illegal hacking of the University of Chicago's computing system by the accuser's confederate a

current inmate in the local prison.

The climax came when, in an attempt to sway public opinion, Gardner agreed to a TV interview for the *Chicago Evening News*, which had, as had other news media, picked up from the *Chronicle* article. Throughout the interview, Gardner repeated many times how many publications he had, and how he was at the top of his profession, and how, if the media listened to the secret accuser, who obviously carried a grudge of some kind, the entire system of peer review would collapse and we would then never again be able to believe the research published in scientific journals. The entire edifice of knowledge and science was under attack!

At this climactic point of the interview, Gardner turned to face the red light of the camera and said with a deep voice and a haughty very serious face:

“I demand that this scurrilous accuser step forward and act like a man, not like a pathetic frightened little girl! Stand behind his accusations and take what is coming to him!”

The camera instantly switched back to the interviewer, a seasoned reporter of many years' experience.

“And there you have it,” she said looking into the camera. “You decide!”

Fade and Out, as they say.

The next day Gardner was invited to meet with the University of Chicago's President where he was fired for his inappropriate sexist comment on prime time television, an offence that required the swift and severe punishment that matched it.

Desert had been served

